

Cultural Vitality in Communities: Interpretation and Indicators

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The text below is a summary of the complete document.

Abstract

This report introduces a definition of cultural vitality that includes the range of cultural activity people around the country find significant. We use this definition as a lens to clarify our understanding of data necessary, as well as the more limited data currently available, to document arts and culture in communities in a consistent, recurrent and reliable manner. We develop and recommend an initial set of arts and culture indicators derived from nationally available data, and compare selected metropolitan areas based on these measures. Policy and planning implications for use of the cultural vitality definition and related measures are discussed.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This monograph, part of a series presenting the work of the Urban Institute's Arts and Culture Indicators Project (ACIP), discusses three major advances in our ongoing work. First, we introduce a definition of cultural vitality that includes the range of cultural assets and activity people around the country register as significant.

Specifically, we define cultural vitality as evidence of creating, disseminating, validating, and supporting arts and culture as a dimension of everyday life in communities.

Second, we use this definition as a lens through which to clarify our understanding of the data necessary, as well as the more limited data currently available, to document adequately and include arts and culture in more general quality of life indicators. Third, we develop and recommend an initial set of arts and culture indicators derived from nationally available data, and we compare selected metropolitan statistical areas based on the measures we have developed.

ACIP's Definition of Cultural Vitality Captures the Wide Range of Arts and Culture Activity Our Research Has Shown People Value

ACIP's first monograph, *Culture Counts in Communities: A Framework for Measurement* (Jackson and Herranz 2002), developed a measurement framework that delineates four domains of inquiry to help capture cultural activity and its role

in communities. The first three of these—the presence of opportunities to participate, participation in its multiple dimensions, and support systems for cultural participation—are appropriate for indicator measurement and make possible a more comprehensive understanding of impacts of arts and culture (the fourth domain). We build on our understanding of the first three domains as we operationalize our cultural vitality concept and determine measures that correspond with it.

Presence. ACIP fieldwork and other research finds that a wide mix of sponsorship (nonprofit, commercial, public, informal), size (large, medium, small), and type of organizations—including presenters of professional artwork, artist-focused organizations, and those that validate and make possible amateur as well as professional arts practice—is essential to create the range of participation reflected in our definition of cultural vitality. We call special attention to what we term "pillar" organizations as particularly significant in fostering diverse kinds of cultural activity and participation. These are usually organizations that have been active for a decade or more and combine some and often all of the following characteristics: (a) involvement in the development of community-based cultural events, (b) relationships with local artists as well as the large cultural venues concerned primarily with the presentation of professional work, and (c) long-standing connections with local parks, schools, community centers, etc., that sponsor community arts and cultural activities. We also found that formal and informal cultural districts—physical concentrations of arts organizations and arts-related businesses as well as professional artists and people who are involved in making art recreationally—are important in helping to stimulate and sustain various crucial aspects of cultural vitality.

Participation. ACIP fieldwork and other research concerned with arts participation reveals that people participate in arts and cultural activity in multiple ways—as practitioners, teachers, students, critics, supporters, and consumers. Several types of participation that are particularly important to sustaining and increasing cultural vitality in a community surfaced in our research. These include collective art making often found in festivals and community celebrations, sustained amateur arts practice, public validation and critical discussion of a range of artistic and cultural practices (amateur to professional) in many forms such as print and electronic media (including the web), and arts education K–12 (kindergarten through high school), as well as after-school arts programs.

Support. It is well known that public sector and foundation support is crucial for arts and cultural activity. However, ACIP has found that commercial sector support is also important for cultural vitality and can be encouraged through public sector incentives such as tax incentives and small business loans. Also important is the integration of arts and culture into other public policy priorities such as education and community development, which can increase the potential support for cultural activity and further contribute to a vibrant cultural scene. This can best be achieved when a community has a network of strong arts advocates, especially outside the formal cultural sector. We also found that a high incidence of artists in one place is

another strong indicator of that location's cultural vitality and provides one measure or indicator of the level of support available for important aspects of artistic endeavor.

Embracing ACIP's Concept of Cultural Vitality Has a Variety of Implications

Our definition of cultural vitality has implications for people both inside and outside the cultural field. On one hand, this definition can be threatening to historically privileged and subsidized forms of cultural participation because it expands the range of stakeholders in the arts (broadly defined) to include people who are not arts "experts" or professionals. On the other hand, it is attractive to many precisely because it is inclusive and potentially engages a more diverse and powerful set of stakeholders in making sure a community has what it needs to be culturally vital. For example, it enables urban designers and planners to give more consideration to ensuring that communities have community/cultural centers, including facilities for the practice of art, that make possible a wide range of arts engagement. It encourages expansion of the cultural district concept to include more opportunities for amateur as well as professional arts engagement. It compels policymakers, funders, and administrators to think more critically about to what aspect of a community's cultural vitality they are contributing. And it enables community members to learn more about the range of cultural activity in their communities and where arts-related investments might best be made.

The Community Indicator Field Has Made Progress in Widening Its Treatment of Arts and Culture Measurement and Prospects for Continuing This Look Good

The past decade has seen a surge of efforts, in a wide range of institutional settings (e.g., independent nonprofits, universities, and governmental agencies), both here and abroad, to track a comprehensive set of indicators in cities and communities. This surge in indicator initiatives and related efforts to improve and expand the issues they report on provide a window of opportunity for the further integration of arts and culture into indicator systems. In the United States, however, still relatively few of these efforts include arts and culture as a separable component, and those that do often continue to use the traditional focus on the number of conventional cultural venues where people can attend arts events, audience attendance, and organizational budget information. However, there are more examples of the integration of arts and culture into indicator systems than was the case ten years ago and there are some strong examples of efforts that do take a broader approach in their definition and also rely on less traditional data sources to characterize the arts and culture in their communities. We highlight these efforts in this report.

The international picture is more encouraging than that of the United States in that arts and culture are typically included as a specific component of many indicator systems. Still, for the most part, the definitions used are typically no less conventional than those used in the United States. However, here too, we see evidence of more inclusive definitions and attempts to identify arts and culture data

that correspond with broader concepts than was the case years ago. In addition to our review of indicator initiatives, we also reviewed three types of initiatives that resemble indicator system development in important ways: city rankings, arts sector reports, and creative economy reports. Of these, we found most evidence of inclusiveness and alignment with aspects of our ACIP approach in creative economy reports. The good news is that interest in the notion of a creative economy is on the rise—growing at national, state, and regional and local levels.

A Schema for Sorting Data for Indicators of Cultural Vitality by Usability

A major contribution of ACIP's recent work is a data reconnaissance effort that goes outside the traditional arts/culture box (extending the usual nonprofit lens to include commercial and informal sectors) in searching for measures of cultural vitality. This effort has involved intensive investigation of national data sources (covering public, commercial, and nonprofit sectors and including parks, education, and library data) as well as more locally generated data (state, regional, county, city, community). Another significant advance has been to categorize, in terms of usability for arts and culture indicator development, the wide array of actual and potential data sources we have identified. Our schema specifies four "tiers":

- Tier one refers to quantitative data that is publicly available, free or of minimal cost, collected at least annually, able to be disaggregated geographically to the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) level or smaller, and nationally comparable. Examples include data from U.S. Census Bureau's County Business Patterns, the National Center for Charitable Statistics, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.
- Tier two data are also quantitative, publicly available, free or virtually free, annually recurrent, and able to be disaggregated to at least the MSA level. However, they are not nationally comparable. Examples include administrative data about parades and festivals collected by police and other city departments, selected annual household surveys, and funding data collected in some places by the local arts agency or a foundation.
- Tier three data are also quantitative but come from sources that are either restricted to a single point in time or sporadic (i.e., not necessarily regular or covering the same material on each repetition).
- Tier four data refer to qualitative or pre-quantitative documentation of phenomena of interest—often from anthropological and ethnographic studies of arts and culture in communities.

Data sources in tiers one and two are suitable for immediate indicator development because they provide quantitative data that are recurrent and, therefore, able to assess trends over time. The advantage of tier one over tier two data is that tier one data are nationally comparable, allowing comparison across communities. The advantage of tier two over tier one is that it typically provides more detailed data and often information about smaller geographies. Data in tiers three and four are not suitable for immediate construction of indicator measures, but are nonetheless important. Tier three can provide examples of and inform how relevant information

might be collected or estimated recurrently (and thus be suitable for indicator development). Tier four can provide instructive contextual information that helps to fill out often essential aspects of a community's cultural vitality picture with strongly suggestive evidence of more nuanced aspects of cultural vitality or facets of cultural vitality that do not lend themselves easily to quantification. It can also help guide the design of quantitative data collection.

Recommended Tier One Measures and Illustrative Rankings of Cities

In chapter 5, we present our priorities for the kinds of phenomena we think should be tracked as dimensions of cultural vitality. With this in mind, we also recommend several nationally comparable measures we have constructed from tier one data to provide indications about some of the priorities we have identified. The measures we have already developed—and our development work is ongoing—expand the range of nationally comparable cultural vitality measures far beyond anything we have seen elsewhere. We use the measures in chapter 7 to provide illustrative rankings of U.S. cities (Metropolitan Statistical Areas). They provide evidence that the relative standing of a city's cultural vitality can change substantially depending on which element of cultural vitality is being compared. This evidence, in turn, argues strongly for including a wide range of measures in any assessment, whether to monitor trends over time in a single community or to make comparisons for a single point in time across different communities.

A Few Cities Have Begun to Use Tier One and Tier Two Measures as well as Information from Tiers Three and Four to Describe Their Communities

Among ACIP's collaborators, there are good examples of the use of ACIP's recommended nationally comparable tier one indicator measures, more locally generated tier two measures and, in some cases, information from tiers three and four to characterize arts and culture in their communities. These are evident in ACIP collaborators' products, which include

- Seattle, Washington—Communities Count: Health Indicators Project
- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—Metropolitan Philadelphia Indicators Project
- Boston, Massachusetts—The Boston Indicators Project

Concluding Comments

This monograph represents significant strides in the development of sustainable indicators of cultural vitality, inclusively defined. Our definition of cultural vitality calls for a much more complex concept of arts and cultural assets in communities and the resources required to bring these to fruition, sustain, or expand them. Our nationally comparable measures and, by extension, our MSA rankings based on the cultural vitality concept are the first of their kind in the United States. They demonstrate beyond doubt that better and more consistently collected data on a wide range of aspects of cultural vitality can substantially change our view about the relative cultural vitality of a community—what it has to offer and what it may lack.

Although barriers to fully capturing cultural vitality in communities still exist to a degree, there is great room for optimism. The surge of interest in creativity signaled by the increasing uses of concepts such as "creative economy," "creative class" and "cool cities" represents a window of opportunity for ACIP's indicator approach. Facilitating access to cultural vitality data, and to measures such as those ACIP is developing, will make it easier for cultural vitality to be integrated into policy discussion and decision making on a broader scale.